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ABSTRACT

Current patterns of Patois (introduced by West Indian Creoles) as used by young Jamaicans in England is presented. Forty-five British-born individuals, aged 16 to 23, whose parents were Jamaican immigrants, participated in a study structured to elicit a wide range of speech patterns. Subjects differed greatly in educational background and in social network relations. Clear differences emerged in formal and informal situations in the length of utterance, the symmetry of exchanges, and the number of interruptions. Five distinct language choice patterns were found. The language behavior of British Blacks varies considerably between individuals and in different situations, and a situational hierarchy exists that allows prediction of the likelihood of a speaker using Patois. There was also evidence that in certain situations, either Patois or English was the marked, or expected choice, with use of the unmarked language signifying clear rejection of a role or status associated with the marked language. The greatest obstacle to the identification of language choice patterns was the lack of objective criteria for labeling a situation as either "Patois" or "English." (MSE)

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LANGUAGE CHOICE AND COMMUNICATIVE INTENT IN A BRITISH BLACK COMMUNITY

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Résumé / Abstract

La situation de la communauté noire antillaise en Grande-Bretagne a subi d'importants changements au cours des quinze dernières années pendant lesquelles l'immigration en provenance des Caraïbes a pratiquement cessé. Cette communication explore les différentes façons dont les usages langagiers des Antillais nés en Grande-Bretagne ont évolué par rapport aux normes noires des Caraïbes. A un des pôles du continuum linguistique on trouve des jeunes noirs dont la langue est identique à celle de la norme des blancs locaux dans des situations de conversation ethniquement mixtes. A l'autre pôle du continuum se trouve une faible proportion de locuteurs qui utilisent le créole dans toutes les situations, quels que soient leurs interlocuteurs. Entre ces deux pôles il existe un large éventail de choix langagiers qui semblent fortement influencés par des considérations de formalité et d'ethnicité. La nature du vernaculaire noir est alors examinée et, sur la base d'une distinction entre traits marqués et non-marqués, une hiérarchie des choix langagiers se dégage. Cette hiérarchie se corrèle de façon significative avec les réseaux sociaux des locuteurs: plus les réseaux sont "noirs", plus le nombre de situations comprenant des traits vernaculaires est élevé. La fonction symbolique du choix de la langue pour les Antillais est analysée en rapport avec les données linguistiques enregistrées ainsi que les perceptions qu'ont les locuteurs de leur situation.

Introduction

Important social and linguistic changes have taken place within the British Black community in recent years. We have seen the gradual transition from an immigrant group that arrived from the West Indies in the 1950's and 1960's, to a mixed community which includes an entire generation of British born young people. This community has a great deal of cohesiveness. Both generations share many common values and cultural perspectives. They are also united in the daily experience of being a visible minority in a country where the low status of black people has remained largely unchanged for more than thirty years (cf. BROWN, 1984).

However, there are also important differences between settlers and British born black people. The younger generation has received a British education, has been exposed primarily to the British media and interpretation of events, and is currently experiencing the worst

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effect of economic depression. Black people have always found themselves at the bottom of the socio-economic pile. But whereas the first generation tended to be employed in jobs at a level beneath their capabilities, many of their children have never been employed and their chances of finding and remaining in work are, in the main, very limited. The social consequences of prolonged racial inequality have begun to manifest themselves in civil disorder and other expressions of frustration (see EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, 1980; SCARMAN, 1981). Given the close inter-relationships between language and society, it is reasonable to surmise that the linguistic behaviour of young black people will act as an accurate thermometer of the current socio-political temperature.

West Indian immigrants spoke varieties of English which drew on essentially the same vocabulary base as British English but differed in important respects in phonology, morphology and syntax (see, for instance, BAILEY, 1966; SUTCLIFFE, 1982). It was expected that their children would quickly assimilate the speech patterns of their white peers as they made their way through the school system, but this did not prove to be the case for many years (EDWARDS, 1979). None the less, important changes took place during the 1970's as a result of progressively more stringent immigration legislation. From the beginning of the decade the number of new arrivals diminished to a trickle and for the first time we were dealing with a generation of British black children rather than a mixed British and Caribbean group, and the emergence of a distinctively British black identity. Although subtle differences remain in the speech of many young black people (cf. SEBBA, 1984), the majority now speak a variety of English identical with or almost indistinguishable from the local white norm.

This has led many white observers to conclude that the importance of "Patois", the community term for West Indian Creoles, is rapidly diminishing in the black community. For many people, competence in Patois is limited to the occasional "deepening" of dialect features (cf. ROSEN and BURGESS, 1980), and it is assumed that, because young people do not use Patois in interaction with whites, they do not use it in other settings either. These conclusions, however, are based for the most part on self-reports of children to white researchers and observation in racially mixed settings such as school, rather than on systematic study of young people in a wide range of situations.

The present study

It is against this backcloth that the present investigation of the patterns of language use in a British black community is set. Forty-five young British born people between the ages of 16 and 23 took part, having been located initially through the network relations of the black fieldworkers on the project. All were members of families who had come originally from Jamaica and currently lived in Dudley, West Midlands. It is impossible to construct a sample

frame for the British Black population which would ensure representativeness. Census data contain no information on ethnicity and other means of identification sometimes used in the study of minority communities, such as country of birth or names (cf. LINGUISTIC MINORITIES PROJECT, 1984) are clearly not relevant in the case of British born black people. It was therefore decided to aim for a judgement sample reflecting those social categories which systematic ethnographic observation suggested would be important in determining language choice. This sample included approximately equal numbers of young men and women from a wide range of educational backgrounds, with very differing attitudes towards mainstream white society. Their social network relations varied from exclusively black to predominantly white.

All of the speakers were recorded in friendship groups of two or three for an average of one and a quarter hours. Each recording session was divided into five different situations. In two thirds of the cases, recording started with a formal interview with a white researcher (situation 1). In the remaining third, this interview was placed last to ensure that any observed differences in language could be attributed to differences in formality and ethnicity rather than any "warm-up" effect. Next followed a formal interview with a black researcher (situation 2). At the end of this section of recording the black interviewer went out in search of questionnaires, leaving the participants with a young white student who had been introduced to them as somebody looking after the tape-recorder, but not officially a part of the project. What followed was informal racially mixed conversation (situation 3). The young people were then presented with questionnaires on British Black language and society. They were told that they would be left on their own so that they could discuss the questions among themselves without pressure from the researchers (situation 4). The black researcher returned 15-20 minutes later with drinks and food and chatted informally with the speakers (situation 5).

This structure proved extremely effective in eliciting a very wide range of speech. There were clear differences between formal and informal situations in the length of utterance, the symmetry of exchanges and the number of interruptions. Particularly pleasing was the success of leaving participants alone in producing truly informal speech. Although no attempt was made to conceal recording equipment, most speakers either assumed that only the interviews were being recorded or completely forgot about the tape-recorder.

What is "Patois"?

Among the questions considered in the course of analyzing the data were the relationships between the frequency of Patois usage and the non-linguistic variables referred to above (education, attitudes towards white society and social network); and the different levels of competence in Patois which are to be found in the British

Black community. For present purposes, however, discussion will focus on the issue of whether it is possible to discern different patterns of language use which might enable us to explain the symbolic functions of "English" and "Patois" usage.

The most serious obstacle to this discussion is the absence of criteria by which we might decide what precisely constitute Patois usage. It should be understood that even in settings where the use of Patois is considered appropriate, very few British Black people use it in a sustained way; in most cases, speakers switch rapidly between "English" and "Patois" from sentence to sentence and even clause to clause, in a way which is characteristic of stable bilingual communities in many parts of the world (see, for example, HERNANDEZ-CHAVEZ, 1975; KACHRU, 1978; POPLACK, 1980). Some writers (cf. LAWTON, 1980) have also observed code-switching behaviour between different parts of the Creole continuum in a Caribbean context. Switching in the British Black community, however, is between two highly focussed varieties with remarkably little of the mesolectal variation that would be expected in Caribbean speech data, and is more reminiscent of a bilingual than a continuum situation.

The problem remains, however, as to what precisely constitutes Patois usage. Some speakers use a wide range of Patois features. either as part of code-switching behaviour or in more sustained usage; others use only Patois phonology and a narrow range of morpho-syntactic features. In some situations, Patois features occur very frequently; in others hardly at all. It is clear that we would not wish to label a set of speech data as "Patois" solely on the basis of the occasional substitution of a dental stop for a fricative or the isolated uninflected plural noun. However, it is not so clear at which point it becomes reasonable to make this decision.

Fortunately, the analysis of Patois frequency mentioned above (see also EDWARDS, 1986) gives some useful clues as to how objective decisions might be made. Frequency scores based on the relative proportions of Patois and English variants of some eleven commonly occurring variables showed that certain situations were clearly "more English" (the formal black and white interviews, and the informal racially mixed conversation) while certain others were "more Patois" (the peer group and the informal black conversations). With the exception of some six speakers who used high proportions of black variants in all five situations, it emerged that only a very narrow range of Patois features (the phonological variants, uninflected nouns and third person present singular - s) were to be found in the "English" situations.

It was therefore possible to divide the variables which formed the basis for the frequency scores into two distinct blocks. The features in the first block act as indicators (cf. LABOV, 1972; CHAMBERS & TRUDGILL, 1980) and show gradient stratification with relatively little social and stylistic variation. The features in the second block, in contrast (pronouns, infinitives, do+neg, simple past, copulas) show sharp stratification corresponding to considerable

social and stylistic variation and behave as markers. The occurrence of features from this second block in the speech of a given speaker in a given situation, irrespective of frequency, was thus held to mark that situation as "Patois" for that speaker. The absence of second block features defined the situation as "English".

Using these classificatory criteria, each speaker was assigned a score from 1 to 5, depending on the number of situations in which they used Block Two features. Speakers varied widely in the scores which they achieved. It was notable, however, that the combination of Patois situations remained invariant across the speakers. Thus, those who used Patois in one situation always chose the same situation, those who used Patois in two situations always chose the same two situations and so on. The implicational relationships which emerged can be seen clearly in Figure 1 below -

Table 1: Proportions of speakers who use Patois variants, situation by situation.

	No. of speakers	Sit. 1 (white formal)	Sit. 3 (white informal)	Sit. 2 (black formal)	Sit. 5 (black informal)	Sit. 4 (black peers)
Pattern 1	5	English	English	English	English	Patois
Pattern 2	14	English	English	English	Patois	Patois
Pattern 3	13	English	English	Patois	Patois	Patois
Pattern 4	4	English	Patois	Patois	Patois	Patois
Pattern 5	6	Patois	Patois	Patois	Patois	Patois

The situational constraints on Patois usage are thus clear to see.

Both formality and ethnicity exert a significant influence over language choice, and though there is a wide range of variation between speakers as to which situations are defined as Patois, an unmistakable hierarchy emerges which allows us to make statements about the conditions most likely to provoke Patois usage in a British Black speaker. In this hierarchy, informal conversation in which all the participants are well known to one another are most likely to give rise to Patois, followed by informal black conversations where the participants are less intimate, formal black interaction, informal racially mixed conversation and, finally, formal conversation with whites.

Social determinants of patterns of language choice

When patterns scores were correlated with the various non-linguistic variables, a statistically significant relationship was found to hold between the speakers' patterns of language choice and their social networks. In the context of the present study, measurements of network related to their degree of integration into the black community. Questions were asked concerning where speakers lived and worked, their friends and leisure activities. Scores were assigned to the various answers in such a way that a high network score indicated that the speaker's social relations were based mainly or even exclusively in the black community, whereas a low score reflected a wide range of voluntary associations with white people.

Interestingly, employment proved to be a very accurate predictor of network score. Those who were out of work understandably spent most of their time with black friends in a similar position, so that unemployment had the effect of consolidating black social networks. Those who were employed, in contrast, were inevitably brought into contact with a much wider range of people in situations where whites were in the majority, and achieved much lower network scores. The effect of unemployment on social network in the British Black community is thus the exact opposite of that described by MILROY (1980) for the working class Belfast community of Ballymacarrett. There the ties created by large numbers of men working for the same employer were highly instrumental in creating tight-knit dense social networks.

In both situations, however, speakers' social networks would seem to exert a powerful normative force on language patterns. When people belong to dense, multiplex networks in which most of the social contacts not only know each other but relate to each other in a variety of ways (e.g. brother, neighbour, work mate) the pressures to conform both socially and linguistically are far greater than in loose-knit networks where a person has contact with a series of unrelated individuals. In a British Black context, the more integrated speakers are into the black community, the more likely they are to use Patois in a wide range of social contexts.

The relationship between Patois patterns and other language measures

A number of misconceptions surround the issue of language choice in the British Black community. There is a widespread assumption, for instance, that Black children who do not speak Patois in racially mixed settings such as school, are unwilling or unable to speak Patois in other settings. Nor would it be unreasonable to assume that those who used Patois in the widest range of situations would also be the most competent Patois speakers. However, close examination of the actual language behaviour of young British Black people does not support these claims.

A number of interesting generalizations can be made about the different language patterns which emerge. Pattern 1 speakers (those who use Patois only in black peer group settings) tend to use only a very narrow range of Patois variants and to have a very limited comptetence in Patois. Pattern 4 and 5 speakers (those who use Patois in all settings, or all settings other than the white formal interview), on the other hand, tend to use a very high proportion of Patois features and to be extremely competent speakers. However, no such generalizations can be made about the Pattern 2 and 3 speakers who form up to 70 per cent of the Dudley sample. The young people who follow these patterns vary considerably both in the frequency with which they use Patois variants and the range of variants which are to be found in their speech.

In order to characterize the language behaviour of British Black speakers we need to draw on a wide range of measures, including frequency and competence, as well as patterns of language choice (cf. EDWARDS, 1986; forthcoming). The particular value of the pattern scores, however, lies in the fact that they allow us to make further useful distinctions between individuals which can explain how and why speakers make different choices.

The symbolic function of language choice

The importance of defining a situation as either "English" or "Patois" lies in the symbolic function of such decisions. If we take the position that in any community there is a general consensus as to which variety is considered the appropriate or "unmarked" choice for a given situation (cf. SCOTTON, 1980), any speaker who chooses to use an unexpected or "marked" variety in this situation is communicating an unambiguous message. In a British setting, English is considered to be the unmarked variety for formal situations such as interviews and racially mixed interactions. Any British black who chooses to use Patois in these situations is thus rejecting the inferior status which is associated with black language and culture in a clear assertion of their black identity. The degree to which a white interlocutor will feel threatened or offended by this choice will clearly be determined by the extent to which they share the speaker's perceptions of that black identity. Similarly, Patois is considered the marked choice in informal black interactions. It acknowledges the speakers' black identity and communicates feelings of warmth, friendship and solidarity. English speech in these situations is likely to be considered prissy, snobbish and disloyal to the group.

This interpretation is supported both by observation of various kinds of interaction and by explicit discussion of these issues by young black people themselves. Participants in the study talked a a good deal, for instance, of the use of Patois in school situations where English is the unmarked choice. In these situations Patois can be used to some considerable effect to exclude white people and,

Table 2 : Distribution of Frequency and Competence Scores according to Patterns of Language Usage.

Speaker	Pattern	Competence(2)	Frequency	Frequency range
20	1	9	93.50	
21	1	10	94.38	
27	1	10	93.59	91.56 to 96.17
35	1	11	96.17	
26	1	12	91.56	
37	2	8	96.29	
39	2	9	94.94	
36	2	10	96.17	
17	2	11	88.08	
38	2	12	92.87	
26	2	13	92.45	
3	2	14	88.99	81.49 to 96.29
8	2	14	88.60	
10	2	14	86.00	
19	2	14	90.93	
42	2	16	81.49	
31	2	18	88.37	
18	2	20	81.73	
41	2	20	83.46	
1	3	13	79.77	
2	3	13	89.77	
9	3	14	88.90	
14	3	15	89.59	
6	3	15	89.17	
7	3	17	91.95	
13	3	18	82.93	78.5 to 91.95
4	3	19	90.26	
11	3	19	89.43	
12	3	19	78.81	
15	3	19	79.20	
34	3	19	86.88	
29	3	20	78.53	
28	4	17	78.39	
24	4	19	42.63	
23	4	20	63.62	42.63 to 78.39
40	4	20	67.50	
32	5	18	37.61	
45	5	18	29.34	
16	5	20	71.32	
33	5	20	48.99	29.34 to 71.32
43	5	20	40.39	
44	5	20	34.10	

in particular, teachers and to assert the validity of the individual's — or the group's — black identity. Sometimes the use of Patois in situations such as these is an act of open aggression or defiance. However, it can also be a more playful activity which bonds the group as they savour the confusion and embarrassment of the white authority figure who does not understand the Patois exchange. Juliet, for instance, recalls the bantering behaviour of one of her class mates:

> "I remember a boy at school ... when she [the teacher] used to really go at him, he used to go back at her in Patois. So, one morning when we got in school, right, she had this book in her hand and on the side of the book you could see 'Talk Patois' and all that, and I says, 'Carlton, look! Look at that book. It's about Patois. She soon get to understand it when you ready fi cuss her'".

White people, of course, ar not always excluded from Patois conversations and there are many reports from the yound people in the present study and elsewhere (cf. HEWITT, 1982) of whites with a good working knowledge of Patois. However, this accomplishment would seem to give rise to very ambivalent emotions on the part of most young British blacks. Although they often find it amusing and, on occasions, even flattering, there is a strong feeling that black language is the property of black people and that whites should not intrude.

Reactions towards black who cannot or will not use Patois in black situations are equally censorious. Norma, for instance, berates her "snobby" sister who, despite the ability to speak Patois, often chooses to use English with other young black people.

> "She speaks it [Patois] to me, to some of her coloured friends who she knows speak Patois, but to her snobby coloured friends she speaks English. She talk Queen English, brebber! She's the snotty one of the family!"

One of the obvious conclusions which can be drawn from an analysis of the different language patterns is that different ranges of Patois features can serve the same symbolic function for different speakers. A highly competent speaker will mark a situation as Patois with the frequent use of a wide range of black variants; a less competent speaker will draw less frequently on a much more limited range. Irrespective of frequency or range, however, the use of Patois markers signals the same symbolic functions.

This analysis goes some way at least towards explaining the rather amazing discrepancies which exist between various estimates of the proportions of British Black people who regularly use Patois. These estimates range between 20 per cent (ROSEN & BURGESS, 1980) and 100 per cent (TOMLIN, 1981). It would appear that the investigators have sometimes failed to identify the most pertinent questions

and, consequently, are measuring quite different phenomena. If the issue is whether British Blacks use language to mark a distinctively black identity, the answer would seem to be that all or almost all of them behave in this way. If, however, the issue is whether all speakers have an active command of a very wide range of Patois features, then it must be conceded that the competence of young British Blacks varies considerably (cf. EDWARDS, 1986; forthcoming).

Discussion

As a result of the emergence of a generation of British born Black people who speak in the main varieties of English almost indistinguishable from the local white norms, there has been considerable speculation that the importance of Patois is disappearing. Such speculation, however, has been based on the observation of young black people in racially mixed settings such as school. More systematic observation suggests that this interpretation of events is extremely misleading, and that it is not possible to extrapolate from racially mixed to other situations.

The language behaviour of British Blacks can be shown to vary considerably both between individuals and between situations. Some speakers in some situations use a high frequency of a wide range of Patois variants; others use a narrow range of Patois variants very sparingly. The greatest obstacle to the identification of any patterns of language choice which may exist is thus the absence of objective criteria which would allow us to decide whether a situation should be labelled as "Patois" or "English".

By analyzing the frequency with which Black speakers use Patois variants, it is possible to identify certain situations as "more English" and others as "more Patois". When the small number of speakers who use high proportions of Patois variants in all situations are excluded, it emerges further that only a very narrow range of Patois variants occur in the more English situations. These features are taken to be Patois indicators. Other features which occur only in more Patois situations are considered to be Patois markers. In this way, it is possible to determine which situations are "Patois" and which "English" for all speakers.

A very distinct pattern emerges across the sample. Those speakers who use Patois in only one situation always choose the same one (the black peer group conversation); those who use Patois in two situations always choose the two informal black situations; those who use Patois in three situations always choose the three black situations; and those who use Patois in four situations always choose the black situations and the informal racially mixed conversation. There is thus evidence of a situational hierarchy which allows us to predict the likelihood of a speaker using Patois.

There is also confirmation that in some situations the consensus view is that English is the unmarked or expected choice and that in others Patois serves this function. The use of the unmarked variety signals compliance with community norms; the use of the marked variety, in contrast, indicates that the speaker refuses to accept the role or status normally associated with that language variety. Thus, speakers who use Patois in an English situation are strongly asserting their black identity and rejecting the low status assigned to black people by the dominant white society. Similarly, in Patois situations, where the use of black variants signals warmth, friendship and solidarity, the exclusive use of English is likely to be perceived as a distancing strategy.

Although the frequency with which speakers' use Patois variants and their overall competence in Patois can be predicted for Pattern 1, 4 and 5 speakers, no such generalizations can be made for Pattern 2 and 3 speakers who represent by far the largest proportion of the present sample. An analysis in terms of patterns of language choice thus has the advantage of allowing us to make further distinctions between individual speakers. It also leads to an understanding that the effect of different frequencies and ranges of Patois usage can serve the same symbolic function and conversational intent.

Notes

1. This paper is work carried out as part of a research project on "Patterns of language use in a British Black community", which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

2. Competence scores were based on the number of Patois features from an inventory of twenty which appeared in the speech of participants at some time during recording, irrespective of the frequency with which they occurred (see EDWARDS, 1986).

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